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PP RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHMOS
DE RUEHIHL #0028/01 0551759
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 241759Z FEB 06
FM REO HILLAH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0553
INFO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0538
RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RUEHIHL/REO HILLAH 0600

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000028

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [PINR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: NAJAF, KARBALA MOSQUES PREACH UNITY AND CALM; BLAME
SADDAMISTS AND TAKFIRIS

REF: HILLAH 0026

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11. (U) Summary: Friday Mosque sermons delivered amidst heavy security in Najaf and Karbala generally appealed for calm and unity, and were followed by peaceful demonstrations. Despite some Sadrism provocations, the two Shi'a holy cities were reportedly quiet, with shops and offices closed and black mourning curtains draped around shrines and religious offices. Rumors and some reports circulated in Najaf and Karbala of Sadrists mobilizing to travel to Samarra. End summary.

NAJAF MOSQUES PREACH MOURNING, UNITY, CALM

12. (SBU) Sadrism statements on February 23 stoked tensions but the mood reportedly cooled in the wake of conciliatory sermons and calls for unity and non-violence at major Najaf mosques during Friday prayers February 24. Sayid Mohammed Al-Tabatabae, a leading Sadrism cleric in Kufa, issued a statement to a crowd of about 800 outside the Kufa Mosque on February 23. The cleric was guarded by black-clad Mahdi Militia members. Many in the crowd carried weapons and images of Moqtada Al-Sadr. The crowd also contained tribal leaders.

13. (SBU) Al-Tabatabae's statement said, "This attack was carried out by the Saddamists and the 'invasion forces,' and it was not carried out by the Sunni. This is a war against Islam that is made by the infidels against our sacred places. We demand immediate action from the national government. We shall not just protest and leave. We shall stay until our demands have been met, and we demand that the U.S. forces withdraw." On Friday, a statement attributed to Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), appeared on Elaph, a Jordanian website generally up-to-date on Iraqi news and Iraqi Al-Furat TV, a SCIRI outlet. In the statement, Al-Hakim blames the followers of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and Saddam Hussein for the Al-Askariyah bombing. It urges the people to be calm and cautious in the face of attempts to incite a civil war, which Al-Hakim says has been the goal of the terrorists for three years.

14. (SBU) Security remained tight in Najaf through February 24. Large numbers of armored cars parked in the vicinity of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani's house on February 24 after Friday prayers sparked rumors that a high-level visitor, possibly SCIRI Leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, had arrived to visit Sistani. Najaf local staff reported that the main entrance to Najaf's Old City was closed by Iraqi Police (IP). Other entrances were partially open but many checkpoints were in place. The Imam Ali Shrine was guarded by Iraqi Army units and vehicles, the doors to the shrine were closed, and security forces were on high alert. The

shrine remained closed and heavily guarded through Friday, and there were no Friday prayers there for security reasons. Cars were barred from the vicinity of the shrine, even for residents of the neighborhood immediately surrounding it.

15. (SBU) The Najaf SCIRI office, adjacent to the Fatimiya Mosque, remained open February 23, local REO staff reported. Security was provided by Badr Organization members, and the fence around the office was covered in black sheets signifying mourning. Most stores in the city remained closed through Friday, February 24. Many had flags and banners of mourning on their doors. Large numbers of people gathered in the city in places traditionally designated for mourning during the Ashura commemoration, and many pictures of Moqtada Al-Sadr hung in these places. Large numbers of Sadrists surrounded the Sadr offices near the Imam Ali Shrine. Crowds also massed around Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani's house nearby.

16. (SBU) Sadr Al-Deen Al-Qubanji, the Najaf SCIRI head and the Imam of the Fatimiya Mosque in Najaf, led the regular Friday prayer service at the Fatimiya Mosque. About 1,000 worshippers attended the prayers, local staff reported, and many more gathered outside. Badr Organization members provided security. The sermon began with a condemnation of the bombing. Al-Qubanji blamed the Baathists and "Wahabbis," and held the national government partially responsible for not doing more to protect the shrine. Then Al-Qubanji called for the unity of the country. He said that the "forces of the believers" should be mobilized to protect the holy shrines and protect the Marja'iyah. He called for a full investigation of the bombing, a group trial of the criminals, and their immediate execution. Al-Qubanji also demanded that local, national and foreign officials make clear their position either for or against the bombing. Al-Qubanji announced a demonstration immediately after the Friday prayers, traveling to the Imam Ali Shrine and from there to the nearby house of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani. By late Friday afternoon, a peaceful demonstration estimated to contain protestors "in the hundreds, not thousands," was underway.

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17. (SBU) At the Kufa Mosque, a Sadrist stronghold, about 1,500 worshippers attended, many dressed in black and armed. Shaykh Falah Al-Obeidi and an assistant preached a sermon calling for Muslim unity and tranquility. He said that Shi'a cities must close for three days and the mourning period would last for seven days. He urged the worshippers to cover all homes, shrines, and religious schools with black drapes. He said that violence against Sunnis and their shrines was prohibited, and that the Mahdi Militia will protect them. Shaykh Falah called upon the Iraqi Government to boycott the U.S. government. Late Friday afternoon, a crowd of about 200 unarmed Sadrists were seen marching through Najaf toward the Sadr offices in the Old City, chanting anti-American slogans.

KARBALA SERMON BLAMES SADDAMISTS, TAKFIRIS; ORDERS CALM

18. (U) Thursday, February 23 passed quietly with no reported major demonstrations or acts of violence. Local staff reported that mid-morning on February 24, six buses, each loaded with about 40 to 50 men, left Karbala heading north to Samarra.

19. (SBU) At the Imam Hussein Shrine, Shaykh Abed Al-Mahdi Al-Karbala'eh, a Sistani representative, led Friday prayers before an audience of about 8,000. At the beginning of the sermon, Shaykh Abed informed the worshippers of a silent demonstration for women and a general demonstration after the service from the Hussein Shrine to the nearby Imam Abbas Shrine. Shaykh Abed told of phone calls he received from the offices of Sistani and senior Najaf cleric Sayid Mohammad Saeed Al-Hakim giving them instructions, which he then described. He related that the offices of the clerics said that the Al-Askariyah bombing was carried out not by Sunnis but by Saddamists,

takfiris and terrorists who do not want democracy to flourish in Iraq. The purpose of these groups was to foment a sectarian war. The clerics called on the Iraqi Government to stand firm against terrorism and to protect sacred places, and admonished that if the Government proved unable to do so, the "faithful" would. Shaykh Abed reminded the worshippers that Sistani had prohibited attacking Sunni shrines and property.

¶10. (SBU) Shaykh Abed then addressed what he said were accusations from the Sunni, who he said blamed the Hawza for instigating demonstrations against the Sunni and causing attacks against them and their shrines. He said that the Hawza had asked the people to demonstrate in order to confront the terrorists, to channel the anguish of the people peacefully rather than "irrationally," and to refrain from responding to the terrorists in the same "cowardly" way as they had acted.

¶11. (SBU) Television crews from Al-Furat, Al-Hurra, Al-Manar (Lebanon), Al-Iraqiya, Al-Anwar (UAE) and Karbala TV covered the service. Afterwards, worshippers left the shrine to cover the short distance, approximately 120 meters, to the Imam Abbas Shrine. As they marched, they carried banners reading, "No, no U.S.A.," "No, no Israel," "No, no Denmark," "No, no Terrorists," and "Yes, yes Ali Al-Hadi" and "Yes, yes to peace." The National Iraqi News Agency (NINA) reported Friday 24 that thousands of protesters marched through Karbala carrying Iraqi flags and banners calling for the dismissal of U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. One banner reportedly read, "No to Zad [sic], no to Takfiris." The protestors chanted: "No to Israel, no to America, yes to unity, yes to Islam".
FONTENEAU